

HELPING THE BLIND TO "SEE"
A MUSEUM

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Helping the Blind To "See" a MUSEUM

By HENRY F. PERKINS, Ph.D.

Director of Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont

OF ALL the relief measures that the American Red Cross carries on—flood relief, hurricane succor, and all the rest—the day-by-day non-emergency service to the sightless is as appealing as any from the humanitarian standpoint and for lasting good.

Ask someone to bring you any unfamiliar article that can be safely handled. Close your eyes. In five minutes' handling, what do you make of it?

An illness or an accident may make one suddenly blind. It has occurred often enough to make us wonder what would be our lot in such a case.

A blind girl visited the museum at the University of Vermont a few months ago to discuss the possibility of her giving a radio talk on some such topic as "What is a blind girl's substitute for a museum?" She was led to the museum, where she and the Director had a good talk about museums, specimens, radio broadcasts and blindness. In his office were a few carved objects. She felt them over, and became keenly interested.

The Director then got out the keys, opened exhibition cases and let her handle Indian gouges and banner stones, Chinese ivories, and mounted birds.

If one blind girl can so intelligently and profitably spend a little while in a museum, why not arrange a museum for the sightless? Why not give them all a chance for instruction and enjoyment? We asked that question, and we have made some attempts to answer it.

Vermont is a small State, and its total number of blind or near-blind is less than 500. But the Robert Hull Fleming Museum of the University of Vermont has held two exhibitions for and by the blind and circulated a seventy-five object collection of all sorts of specimens.

The collection is composed of crystals, carved objects in stone and wood, animals, archaeological examples, fossils, textiles and ethnological (race cultural) material.

This sightless people's travelling collection is available to any Red Cross Chapter in the country. However, the chief purpose of this article is to suggest to local Chapters that similar collections can probably be arranged by their nearest museum. See what the museums are ready to do for the blind. If you meet with any discouragements, write to the Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, and we shall be more than glad to take care of your needs to the best of our ability.

Can you imagine having a model of an Eskimo kayak or an Alaskan totem pole in your hands, having heard of neither, with only a few words of description on the braille tag attached to each? You would do as did



"Seeing" by touch—a statuette of Buddha and a starfish

some of our blind visitors. You would ask for more information.

The Red Cross, the Vermont Association for the Blind, and the Lions Club gave the Museum splendid cooperation in preparing braille typed labels, transporting blind people and furnishing hostesses. But it was the field worker for the blind of the Vermont State Department of Public Welfare to whom the blind visitors and the Museum were especially indebted for the spade work.

You always have a chance to learn lessons from any experiment. The exhibitions for the blind have been an experiment—a more successful one than some of ours. We have learned these two lessons: First, it is important to have a museum staff member always available to spot the blind visitor and show him around. No outsider can answer his questions quite so well. Secondly, failing that, or in case of two or more coming in at once, have Braille labels fully typed—a card of 5 x 7 inches, typed on one side and with Braille on the other.

The blind were asked, when ready to leave, to comment on the exhibition and suggest improvements for our guidance in planning possible future exhibitions. Several wished that the labels could tell more about the specimens. Others were disappointed that no more articles made by the sightless were on display. One lad was all agog over the one firearm, an old revolver, that had been included. He was disappointed that the entire collection was not made up of firearms. The old colonial implements and utensils of the Early



One examines carvings while other reads braille description

Vermont collection appealed to quite a number—especially those who had been in homes with such cherished heirlooms.

The background of the blind visitor makes the greatest possible difference in his impressions, and the guide must be quick to sense these differences in mental ability and early education. A person blind from birth has only blank stretches where the person who saw for even a few years of childhood has certain fundamental background impressions. Hence, the person who has never seen is entitled to more attention and patient explaining than others.

We have a very ancient and beautifully preserved Assyrian bas-relief. It is embedded in the wall of our entrance hall and is our tutelary god, or trade-mark. What does the sightless person make of it? As they studied it with quick, sensitive fingers, their expressions and their every movement and posture registered eagerness and the joy of discovery.

This carving is so large that they had to stand on a chair to reach the head of the king-priest-deity carved in the alabaster 3,700 years ago. The delicate characters of the strange cuneiform inscription intrigued them greatly.

The eagerness of our sightless visitors was their most conspicuous reaction. The members of the staff were alarmed, at first, lest in their eagerness to get hold of one object after another some damage might result but, with the exception of one card table collapsing and doing a little harm to one of the geological specimens, there was no casualty.

The purpose of setting down these comments upon

the exhibition for the blind is to bring to the attention of the friends of the American Red Cross in various parts of the country, the possibility of carrying on such an undertaking almost anywhere. We are told that in a few of the larger museums one or more rooms have been set apart for use of blind people and the material exhibited there is changed from time to time. In the larger communities, where it might be possible to assemble a dozen or more sightless people at once, talks, illustrated by means of objects that could be passed around, would add a great deal to the value of the exhibition.

The members of the museum staff felt that, however greatly the blind enjoyed and profited by the chance to "see" the various exhibits, perhaps the greatest benefit came from the newly aroused interest of sighted people in the blind themselves. Surely, a world in which those favored with the sense of sight understand the plight of those who are deprived of sight, sympathize with their predicament, appreciate their efforts to adjust themselves and admire the courage and determination with which they set themselves to this task, will be a better world for the blind themselves. Our sighted visitors evinced a great deal of interest in the experiment and were keenly alive to the reactions of the blind visitors and the way in which they had learned how to use the sense of touch in much the same way that the rest of us use our sense of vision.



By means of alphabetical glove, Mrs. Richardson Dunham, chairman of braille for Chicago Chapter, converses with Ada Marie Youmans of Harvey, Ill., deaf and blind, who is one of the founders of "Our Special," a braille magazine

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